



## Albania

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,100 square miles and a population of 3.6 million. No reliable data were available on religious participation or membership; the last official census including such data was held in 1939. The majority of citizens do not actively practice a faith; however, the four traditional religious groups are Muslim (Sunni), Bektashi (a particularly liberal form of Shi'a Sufism), Orthodox Christian (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania), and Roman Catholic. In addition, there are substantial numbers of Protestant denominations, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and other religious groups.

The State Committee on Cults reported a total of 245 religious groups, organizations, and foundations in addition to the four traditional religious groups. This number includes 34 Islamic organizations and 189 Protestant organizations, mostly associated with the Albanian Evangelical Alliance (VUSH).

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government is secular. According to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. Official holidays include holy days of all four predominant faiths.

The Government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups; however, the State Committee on Cults maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organizations that contact it for assistance. No groups reported difficulties registering during the period covered by this report. All registered religious groups have the right to hold bank accounts and own property. Religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which

recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. All religious communities criticized the Government for its unwillingness to grant them tax-exempt status.

The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the Government and religious communities as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting interreligious cooperation and understanding. The committee claims that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization claimed any difficulty in obtaining residency permits during the period covered by this report. However, as a general rule, foreign missionaries were issued only 1-year residency permits instead of the 5-year permits allowed by law for residents in the country more than 2 years. The committee continued working with the Government on criteria that would allow residency permits of up to 5 years for well-established religious organizations with long-term ties to the country.

Article 10 of the Constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the Government and religious communities. The Catholic Church continued to be the only religious community that had such an agreement with the Government. The Committee on Cults had a mandate to negotiate agreements with the three remaining traditional groups. VUSH, a Protestant umbrella organization, also asked to negotiate a bilateral agreement. At the end of the period covered by this report, Parliament had not ratified any additional agreements.

The Ministry of Education states that public schools are secular and that the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations managed 101 educational institutions, of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools. By law, the Ministry of Education must license such schools, and curriculums must comply with national education standards. The Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems in obtaining licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church and the Bektashis operated strictly religious educational centers for the training of clerics.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There is no law prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols. School principals have the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which at times included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. During the reporting period, two female public high school students were expelled for wearing headscarves. One subsequently accepted a scholarship at a private religious institution, while the second remained at home.

The Government continued to address claims from each of the four traditional religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims of all four communities remained unresolved.

The Orthodox Church continued construction of a new cathedral in Tirana on land that it received as compensation for other land seized by the communist government, but it cited lack of action on other property claims throughout the country.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church included in their restitution claims religious icons and precious manuscripts seized by the communist government that remained in the national archives.

The Albanian Islamic Community continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land that was returned to the community through the post-communist restitution process. The request remained under consideration by the Municipality of Tirana.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, nor were any substantial acts of vandalism reported.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy was active in promoting religious tolerance, sponsoring interfaith centers in the cities of Shkoder, Elbasan, and Tirana and engaging young persons, women, and other community members in joint activities such as seminars and community gatherings.

A U.S. government-funded project supported the peaceful coexistence of religious groups by fostering cooperation through interaction and dialogue. The project provided religious leaders and activists the skills and techniques to resolve conflicts among members of their own faith or between religious groups, and it provided technical assistance, training, and financial assistance through small grants to implement community development projects that promote dialogue. This project, as well as other embassy efforts, supported the efforts of the State Committee on Cults to develop and complete bilateral agreements between the state and religious communities. Constitutionally mandated, these agreements were also expected to better define the relationship and responsibilities between the Government and these communities.

The Embassy continued to urge the Government to address religious property claims and return buildings, land, and other property to religious groups that lost them under communist rule.

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